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Knowledge and Design in the Era of Second-Order Cybernetics

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Second order cybernetics may be thought of as a way of thinking, or seeing the world and our relationship to it. By considering what this way of thinking offers us, and its implications, we may come to see the world in a new way, a way that may match more closely the experience we recognize and which is what we live in.

One way of distinguishing second order cybernetics is through the choice of prepositions: in first order cybernetics, the observer is an observer of the system, whereas in second order cybernetics, the observer is an observer in the system.

The observer in the system is the active observer. The active observer is involved in making the world he believes he is part of. But the sort of knowledge that this observer needs is not the traditional knowledge that has been developed in the academic world, which can be characterised as knowledge of (what is). It is, rather, what I propose to call knowledge for (action).

One area in which knowledge for has, traditionally, been at its heart is design. Gordon Pask sensitively and perceptively described design as a form of conversation. Not only do designers develop knowledge for, they also use this knowledge in the construction of new “things”—objects, processes, entities, worlds. In this keynote I will explore this argument and some of the connections between design, knowledge for and second order cybernetics.

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